

Review of *History on the Run: Secrecy, Fugitivity, and Hmong Refugee Epistemologies* by Ma Vang (Duke University Press)

by [Aline Lo](#) | [Book Reviews, Issue 11.1 \(Spring 2022\)](#)

ABSTRACT In *History on the Run: Secrecy, Fugitivity, and Hmong Refugee Epistemologies*, Ma Vang deftly answers the question of how one can “recount a history that has systematically been kept secret” by centering Hmong refugees as sources of knowledge and critique (7). Her book scrutinizes the refugee archive to draw out stories that have been secreted away in other places: in a missing baggage claim, in the neutralization of Laos, in redacted documents, in the figure of the uncivilized Hmong soldier, in the naming of a war as “secret,” in the silenced bodies of Hmong women. Her central concept of “history on the run” refers to a form of fugitive knowledge that “does not remain still and cannot easily be found” (8). Vang’s book makes explicit the forms of knowledge that travel with and within refugee bodies, rather than the “official” history of the archive.

KEYWORDS [history](#), [archive](#), [refugees](#), [Hmong studies](#), [epistemologies](#), [secrecy](#), [fugitivity](#), [soldier](#)

History on the Run: Secrecy, Fugitivity, and Hmong Refugee Epistemologies. By Ma Vang. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2021, 272 pp. (paperback) ISBN 9781478011316. US List: \$26.95.

In *History on the Run: Secrecy, Fugitivity, and Hmong Refugee Epistemologies*, Ma Vang deftly answers the question of how one can “recount a history that has systematically been kept secret” by centering Hmong refugees as sources of knowledge and critique (7). Drawing attention to the irony of the “Secret War,” a clandestine war fought in Laos during the Vietnam War, Vang outlines many forms of erasure while at the same time calling to task those who would try to normalize or recuperate loss, trauma, and displacement; those who would try to minimize and white out Hmong refugee knowledge; and those who would try to divorce Hmong refugee epistemologies from place, both figurative and literal. Her book scrutinizes the archive to draw out stories that have been secreted away in other places: in a missing baggage claim, in the neutralization of Laos, in redacted documents, in

the figure of the uncivilized Hmong soldier, in the naming of a war as “secret,” in the silenced bodies of Hmong women. Through Vang’s incisive and careful analysis, these acts and objects of erasure become powerful critiques of the United States’ militarism and the recuperative, revisionary narrative of refugee “rescue.” Her central concept of “history on the run” refers to a form of fugitive knowledge that “does not remain still and cannot easily be found” (8). Unlike histories that are found within official documents that are themselves fixed within the archive, “histories on the run” are felt or made present in the traces that trail behind or alongside those who have been displaced. Thus, Vang’s book makes explicit the forms of knowledge that travel with and within refugee bodies, rather than within the “official” history of the archive. In centering Hmong refugees, Vang continues the work of critical refugee studies and forges new paths for critical Hmong studies.

The first chapter begins to unearth the epistemological harm of secreted knowledge through a meticulous analysis of the formulation of Hmong soldiering and of a neutralized Laos. For the former, Vang argues how the secret recruitment, training, and deployment of Hmong men—soldiering—was a “civilizing tool” meant to both “save” Hmong peoples *and* use them as expendable proxies for US servicemen (38). This dualistically exploitative and recuperative use of Hmong soldiers is in line with the contradictory neutralization of Laos. In what Vang calls a state of “suspended decolonization,” Laos was at once declared a neutral state even as it was used as a site to repel Communist forces. Thus, Laos, like Hmong soldiers, was falsely presented as a site ready to be civilized so that it could be more readily exploited. Both these concepts point to Vang’s larger critique of the “secret war” as an “interimperial event” that was connected to overlapping histories of Southeast Asian colonization (28).

The second chapter continues the discussion of harm by focusing more directly on archival materials and reading through the lens of “missing things” (62). Examining archived maps, memos, letters, forms, etc., Vang does not set out to correct the record, but to think more concretely about how these redactions and erasures construct and limit knowledge production. In a form from resettlement case files that list “Occupation and Skills,” Yang reads beyond the physical words to ruminate on the longer histories that cannot be captured in the term “student,” reminding us of the incomplete and destructive nature of the archive and challenging us to read through absences and erasures.

In the third chapter, Vang focuses on the Hmong Veterans’ Naturalization Act of 1997 in order to draw out the contradictions of secretive knowledge and the problematic “reward” of citizenship and public recognition. Largely using transcripts from the subcommittee hearings about the bill, which was meant to ease the naturalization process for Hmong soldiers and widows, Vang points to the continued effort to present Hmong refugees as uncivilized victims and the US as modernizing savior. More broadly, Vang reads this event

as “but one domain in the politics of recognition,” as an incomplete and flawed gesture to address the violent secrecy of this war (112).

The fourth chapter, further emphasizing the insufficiency of citizenship as a form of recognition and inclusion, discusses what Vang calls the “terrorist ally” or the dramatic transformation of the refugee ally into a terrorist threat. By analyzing mostly Hmong media coverage of General Vang Pao’s alleged crimes against the state, Vang argues that this event simultaneously reveals the dangers of state secreted knowledge *and* the power of Hmong “assertion of history and secrets” (124).

Vang ends with a fifth chapter on Hmong American media representation, turning to Kao Kalia Yang’s *The Latehomecomer: A Hmong Family Memoir* and the film *Gran Torino*. Vang reads the grandmother characters in the respective works as figures who “drag history” to “underscore the silences and unspeakability of militarized violence” in order to subsequently make those silences speak (147). For example, Vang argues that the bags that the grandmother in Yang’s memoir moves from house to house show how “she managed to stay mobile in order to pass on histories and knowledge in spite of the confines of her status as a Hmong-speaking refugee woman” (152). These bags are not direct remnants of things carried from Laos for many of these things are gone. Instead, in Vang’s analysis, the bags mark the grandmother’s mobility, a mobility that makes it possible for her to share the knowledge that the author Yang will then go on to write down.

The idea of history on run—of grappling with what has been visibly erased—is a particularly helpful framework for a field like Hmong American Studies that has often been defined through dualistic terms that seem to cancel each other out, such as the good soldier but the bad refugee, or the invisible Asian American but the hypervisible non-model minority. And, within the field of Asian studies, scholars, many of whom are white, have, for so many years, made Hmong people primitive objects to be classified and explained away. While both fields have changed with Hmong scholars like Chia Youyee Vang and Mai Na Lee, Vang’s book is the first to fully claim critical Hmong studies. It truly marks a turn in Hmong studies, one that demands complexity and rigor, and asks its readers to think critically about Hmong knowledge and about how academia sustains white supremacy. In naming these open secrets, Vang demonstrates that knowledge—if one is careful to drag histories on the run—*can* indeed be powerful.

Author Information

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Aline Lo is a scholar of American refugee literature and Hmong American Studies. She currently holds the position of Assistant Professor of Asian American literature at Colorado College. She has published on Hmong, Southeast Asian American, and refugee film and literature. Her other interests include migration, gender, and life writing. Her current book project posits the "problematic" elements of Southeast Asian American literature as generative, emphasizing the untidy, uncomfortable process of reading texts that trouble cultural and literary expectations.

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